

AMERICAN PUBLIC EDUCATION AND THE TYRANNY OF MODERN THOUGHT

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Today the people of the United States suffer from a deep cultural malaise, and with this cultural malaise there has come a loss of faith in the public school as an effective agent in the development of a free society. In fact, there has been a gross deterioration in this respect that responsible scholars are charging that our educational operations at all levels are mindless.

William E. Drake

Southwestern Philosophy of Education Society, 1972

Introduction

Where is humanity? We speak of living, of existing, of *being* itself, only in terms of degrees of materiality and sensory feelings of pleasure. How is your health? In what neighborhood do you live? In what good restaurants have you eaten lately? Where did you vacation this year? What is your profession? The motto of modern living appears to be, "I shop, therefore I am." Reproduction appears to have replaced uniqueness, originality. In all of this present-day, modern sense of *being*, where is philosophy? Where is education? Both the explanation and justification for the modern sense of *being* is governed by the disciplines of economics, sociology, and history. Regarding the dominance of history and sociology, the French philosopher Luce Irigaray argues that,

We should be what apparently we are, what we have already shown of ourselves. As for the rest, our becoming would be prescribed by our genes, or by what has already been deciphered of them. Our growth is to have stopped one day. We are to have become at best objects of study. Like the whole living world, destroyed little by little by exploration—exploration of what it is instead of cultivating what it could become.¹

Americans have a special interest in humanity. At the twilight of the Enlightenment and the dawn of modern thought, the United States chartered itself in the Declaration of Independence on a foundation of humanity. This charter bears remembering, repeating.

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of

Happiness. That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed.²

Both the preservation and furtherance of these Rights were to be guaranteed through the Constitution. The preamble to the Constitution states that, ". . . [to] secure the Blessings of liberty to ourselves and our Posterity . . ." The Constitution likewise valorized both the individual and the People in the enumeration of prohibitions on governments in the Bill of Rights. The First Amendment, for example, states that

Congress shall make no laws respecting the establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.

The word "no" in this amendment excludes all qualifications. It is a flat prohibition on the powers of government officials. It is substantive, not procedural as some might assume.

The Supreme Court has consistently recognized the legitimacy of the rights of each individual inherent in the Constitution. For example, Mr. Justice Jackson writing for the majority in the 1943 landmark *West Virginia State Board of Education v. Barnette* stated:

The very purpose of the Bill of Rights was to withdraw certain subjects from the vicissitudes of political controversy, to place them beyond the reach of majorities and officials and to establish them as legal principles to be applied by courts. One's right to life, liberty, and property, to **free speech**, a free press, freedom of worship and

assembly, and other fundamental rights **may not be submitted to vote; they depend on the outcome of no election** [emphasis added].* * *

If there is any fixed star in our constitutional constellation, it is that no official, high or petty, can prescribe what shall be orthodox in politics, nationalism, religion, or **other matters of opinion** [emphasis added] or force citizens to confess by word or act their faith therein.³

The lengthening history of the United States reveals little substantive progress toward fulfilling the liberal democratic promises, such as **equity, access, and freedom of speech** (defined implicitly by Justice Jackson as “opinion,” thought itself) embedded in the Founding documents. Some of the Founders, in particular Thomas Jefferson, believed that it would be only through an educated citizenry that these promises, these ideals could eventually be realized. In Jefferson’s words, “If a nation expects to be ignorant and free in a state of civilization, it expects what never was and never will be.”⁴

Heeding Jefferson’s call for an educated citizenry, all states eventually developed a system of state sponsored and locally administered free public schools. The primary, most fundamental purpose of these schools was to educate children to a level appropriate to assume the fundamental political office of *citizen*. As educated citizens, they would engage in a democratic political process that would eventually allow each citizen to fully exercise both the explicit and implicit rights inherent in the Founding documents.

This view of education for citizenship was still popular in the middle of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1849 Horace Mann, in his *Tenth Annual Report*, had this to say regarding the minimum education for citizenship

[I]t seems clear to me that the minimum of this education can never be less than such as is sufficient to qualify each citizen for the civil and social duties he will be called to discharge—such an education as teaches the individual the great laws of bodily health, as qualifies for the fulfillment of parental duties; as is indispensable for civil functions of a school or juror; as is necessary for the voter in municipal and national

affairs; and finally, as is requisite for faithful and conscientious discharge of all duties which devolve upon inheritor of a portion of the sovereignty of the great republic.⁵

The notion that public education likewise was to play a significant role in “leveling” the differences caused by wealth was still popular 100 years after the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Ralph Waldo Emerson, in his 1876 essay “Education,” explained the democratizing character of public-funded schooling.

We have already taken, at the time of the planting of the Colonies, (for ought I know for the first time in the world) the initial step, which for its importance, might have been resisted as most radical of revolutions, thus deciding at the start of the destiny of this country, —this namely, that the poor man, whom the law does not allow to take an ear of corn when starving, nor a pair of shoes for his freezing feet, is allowed to put his hand in the pocket of the rich, and say, You shall educate me, not as you will, but as I will: not alone in the elements, but, by further provisions, in the languages, in sciences, in the useful and elegant arts.⁶

But much earlier, in 1848, Horace Mann warned in his *Twelfth Annual Report* that without an educated electorate the American democratic ideals relative to the influence of wealth could not be fully achieved. Without universal education for all, the majority of the people would be “. . . the vassals of as severe a tyranny, in the form of capital, as the lower classes of Europe are bound to the aristocracy in the form of brute force.”⁷

Considering the current rigidity of socioeconomic status (SES) in America today, Mann predicted the future with amazing precision. In terms of economic democracy, Thomas Frank, in his popular book *One Market Under God: Extreme Capitalism, Market Populism, and the End of Economic Democracy*, reports that

[f]or the majority of American workers, wages through the [nineteen] nineties either fell or barely kept pace with inflation. But for the top corporate executives these really were the years in which to stand up and say “I Am.” According

to *Business Week* magazine, CEO compensation during the whole decade went from 85 times more than what average blue-collar employees received in 1990 to some **four hundred and seventy five times** what blue-collar workers received in 1999. . . . And these were the average numbers, remember. In 1997, Jack Welch, the much revered CEO of General Electric, was paid 1,400 times the average wage earned by his blue-collar workers in the US—and 9,571 times the average wage earned by Mexican industrial workers, who made up the increasing percentage of the GE workforce as production was moved to the region just across the border [emphasis in the original].⁸

Frank also reports that in 1986, 1 percent of Americans owned 35.7 percent of the nation's wealth. By 1997 it rose to 40.7 percent. By 1995, the next 9 percent of the wealthiest Americans owned 33.3 percent of the wealth. Referring to the Gini Index, a comprehensive standard of inequality, the lowest levels of inequality was in the 1960s and the highest in the late 1920s. By the end of the 1990s "wealth polarization" was about that of the late 1930s.

In his recent book, *Wealth and Democracy: A Political History of the American Rich*, Kevin Phillips noted that in 1790, on the eve of the ratification of the Constitution,

the fortune of America's supposed first millionaire, Elias Hasket Derby, was roughly four thousand times the assets or annual income (in kind) of the average Massachusetts family. Alongside Derby's, the size of their wealth would have been like a car crouching at the base of Mount Greylock, Massachusetts's highest peak (3,491 feet). That was the scale the citizenry could deal with. Not so the biggest U.S. technology fortunes of 2000. These towered like 14,000-foot Rocky Mountain peaks over a median family income that by comparison was ant-sized and almost invisible.⁹

It appears that the education that Emerson said was necessary for citizenship in a democracy apparently was not what was and is being provided. Achieving the democratic ideal of reasonable

economic equity through citizenship education was overtaken by prolonged periods of unbridled economic *laissez-faire* excesses resulting in the gluttonous transfer of wealth from the masses to a relatively few.

What went wrong? Why is it that over 200 years since the ratification of the Constitution, and over 150 years of generally universal public education, such democratic ideals as equity and access are still seemingly beyond the reach of many Americans, when no one should be denied? I contend that this failure can, at base, be assigned to the hegemony, the tyranny of *modern thought*, the foundation of which, we are led to believe, transcends human consciousness.

Along with others presently and in the past, I will argue that within only a few decades of the adoption of the Bill of Rights, *technology*, a particular form of modern thought exercised through the social sciences, became a tyrannical justification in displacing virtue in the politics of Western socioeconomic structuration. The notion of **technology** used herein is not the pirated modern sense, which pertains to material, electronic devices, but in the ancient Greek *techne*, the method of producing artifacts. More important, I argue that the tyranny of modern thought has been promoted through the institution of public schooling.

Modern Thought

In my argument, **modern thought** is not to be confused with the entirety of the more familiar notion of **modernity**. I rely here on Madan Sarup's definition of modernity as

the progressive economic and administrative rationalization and differentiation [separation of fact from value] of the social world. . . . as a summary term, referring to that cluster of social, economic and political systems brought into being in the West from somewhere around the eighteenth century onwards.¹⁰

Modern thought is more fundamental. It is the epistemological foundation, the life-blood that both explains and justifies modernity. Modern thought is expressed most prominently in the natural sciences and, in particular for the argument herein, the array of modern social sciences that acquired academic

acceptance only in the nineteenth century and within only the penumbra of the epistemology of the natural sciences.

If there is only one notion that is fundamental to modern thought, it is **division**. Division in the natural world is not at issue here. In the natural world, division counts only when it pertains to what can be seen either directly or with material instruments that can physically reveal what cannot be seen with the naked eye. It is the transference of the natural science notion of division into the human sciences that modern thought endowed itself with its repressive, tyrannical power.

In the natural sciences, with division comes classification. In chemistry there is the classification of elements in the periodic table. In biology life-forms are classified by kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, and genus. Following the natural sciences, the social science depends heavily on division. In sociology, persons are divided by SES. In psychology, there is a seemingly endless process of division and classification. For example, the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-III) published in 1987 listed 311 psycho-pathologies that the manual claimed could be clinically diagnosed. The fourth edition (DSM-IV) published in 2000 listed 397 presumed pathologies. If the listings in the DSM are legitimate indicators, then it appears that the "science" of human behavior is so robust that on average each year since 1987 more than nine additional human psycho-pathologies have been "discovered."

In the field of education, **division** as the foundation of a science of education appears to be even more pronounced than in sociology and psychology. Oscar Buros' first bibliography of testing, published in 1934, was only forty-four pages. By 1938, now known as the familiar *Mental Measurement Yearbook* (MMY), Buros' bibliography had more than 400 pages listing about 4000 tests.¹¹ The 1995 edition of the MMY has 1259 pages, and far far too many tests for me to estimate let alone count.¹²

As Ian Hacking reminds us, the problem with the wholesale transference of the notion of

classification from the natural sciences to the social sciences is that classifications in the natural sciences are not interactive, whereas, the classifications in the social sciences are interactive. That is, in the social sciences "there are conscious interactions between **kind** and **person** [emphasis added]"¹³ Hacking explains.

Ways of classifying human beings interact with the human beings who are classified. There are all sorts of reasons for this. People think of themselves as of a **kind**, perhaps, or reject the classifications. All our acts are under the descriptions, and the acts that are open to us depend, in a purely formal way, on the descriptions available to us. Moreover, classifications do not exist only in the empty space of language but in institutions, practices, material interactions with things and other people. . . . Only within such a matrix could there be serious interaction between the "kind" of person and the people who may be of that kind.¹⁴

In education, for example, once the notion of a Behavioral-Developmental (BD) student has been invented from observations of student behaviors in classrooms, we construct a "definite" **kind** of person. This kind of person becomes reified. Rupert's parents send Rupert to first grade as a particular person they have come to know in the years before reaching school-age. If Rupert fits the institutionally determined criteria for BD, then regardless of what he was before, Rupert is now BD. That is, Rupert's BD-defined character exists as an entity constructed with the discourses that represent the meanings of what professionals enter on Rupert's school record. Thus, as Janine Duncan argues, the school "overwrites" the character that Rupert acquired, to a large degree, through his pre-school family-life interactions.¹⁵ But as a child, can Rupert resist the power of official, professional law-like descriptions of his character? If not, then Rupert might take on behavioral characteristics of a BD child precisely because he has been so classified.

Lost also in the everyday procedures of schooling is the fact that the BD child is not the person, but only an institutionally defined "species" of person, a legal entity used by the federal government, state

education agencies, local school boards, psychologists, teachers, and special education activists. Lost is the fact that Rupert is aware of what is said about him, thought about him, and done to him in the name of the legal status of BD.¹⁶ Lost also is the fact that the ideal BD child was constructed from the interaction of the discourses representing three fundamentally different categories---concepts (constructs), the contexts of schooling practices, and people.¹⁷ How did this conflating of the discourses, representing essentially discrete categories, acquire rational-empirical legitimacy?

At about the same time that Horace Mann was describing the kind of education necessary for American citizenship, Adolphe Quetelet (1776-1874), astronomer turned social scientist was hard at work in France arguing that through the application of the "astronomical error law," what we now call the bell-shaped "normal" curve of distribution, he could "look" into the mind, the very conscience, of any French conscript rejected for the military service because he was too short. That is, Quetelet transferred the accuracy of the judgmental power of what could be **seen**, the directly observable physical height of the conscript, to the **unseen**---the moral disposition of any particular conscript to defraud the government by evading military conscription by somehow appearing to be shorter than his actual physical height. Quetelet came to this conclusion after his analysis of a particular population of conscripts that revealed a bi-modal curve instead of the symmetrical curve that he expected when he applied the "astronomical error law." He reasoned that because the smaller peak in the curve to the left of the population mean was at the precise height that would exclude a conscript from military service, that the conscripts at that point were somehow cheating.

Quetelet's intellectual leap across the abyss separating the bounded, observable material world from unbounded, non material human thought would be the ever shifting intellectual sand upon which much of what constitutes the modern human sciences rest, **construct validity**. Quetelet's work, when linked to that of Francis Galton (1822-1911), James Clerk Maxwell (1831-1879), Charles Sanders

Peirce (1839-1914), and Karl Pearson (1857-1936), constitutes a genealogy of discursive elements that presently operate as modern technologies of subjectification which, when exercised through institutional practices, contributes ultimately to human subjugation.¹⁸

By the turn of the nineteenth century, public schools, already constituted along the lines of the factory system, were vulnerable to the infection of "scientific," rational discourses operating through the technologies of "scientific management."¹⁹ These technologies in reality operate to subjugate children by justifying division, classification, and, ultimately, hierarchal stratification. Today, the technologies of subjectification currently operate most powerfully through testing, especially through the use of "standardized" tests mandated by laws, such as the recent federal legislation given the titled "No Child left Behind," which requires states to administer periodic state-wide testing in certain curriculum areas if they are to receive federal funds prescribed in the Act. But what purpose do these tests serve?

The fundamental purpose of a mental test, at least, is to separate each test taker from the others on some criteria, some **construct**. Thus, such tests inherently **divide**. More accurately, testing experts claim that the "power" of a test is its ability to **discriminate** the test takers from each other. Consistently little or no discrimination calls into question a test's **reliability** and, ultimately, its **validity**, which, logically, should first be established. The notions of both reliability and validity are essential to claims that a test is "standardized." The higher the reliability factor of a test, the higher the claim of its validity, regardless of whether or not the foundation of all test validity claims---the **construct** that a test is claimed to measure---is "real," that it exists independent of value judgements.

Given the high predictability of commercially available standardized academic achievement tests, and the fact that they are essentially linguistic-discursive---thus measures of language skills---the distribution of scores along SES lines can be predicted with almost 100% accuracy before such a

test is administered. So what purpose do these testing-every-student-in-sight policies serve the American society? Surely the purpose is not to measure whether or not socioeconomic stratification has been erased. But the interaction effects inherent in social science research might shed some light on the effects of such testing.

The children in the various SES categories are well aware of what is being said about them. What they come to believe of themselves, their very sense of *being*, when proclaimed testing “experts” and “professional” educators at all levels tell them who they “really” are through the results of widely publicized, often repeated, politically mandated testing as they go through their K-12 schooling years? The most devastating effect is on Rupert himself, who, after at least twelve years of being subjected to these tests, comes to believe what the “experts” say he is. To the extent that the institutionally sanctioned power to construct individuals is viewed instead by professionals within the institutions as the power simply to reveal what was always already present in the individual, this power is tyrannical.

Tyranny

For my definition of **tyranny** I rely heavily on the work of Leo Strauss and his popular book, *On Tyranny*. Strauss argues that “Society will always try to tyrannize thought,”²⁰ but does so differently depending on historical periods. To this end, he distinguishes modern (present-day) from classical (pre modern) tyranny. Strauss explains the difference.

In contradiction to classical tyranny, present-day tyranny has as its disposal “technology” as well as “ideologies”; more generally expressed, it presupposes the existence of “science”; i.e., of a particular interpretation, or kind, of science. Conversely, classical tyranny, unlike modern tyranny, was not confronted, actually or potentially, by a science which was meant to be applied to “the conquest of nature” or to be popularized and diffused.²¹

Given the general definition of politics as the authoritative allocation of values and resources in a society, Strauss argues that “[t]yranny is a danger

coeval with political life”;²² therefore, to fully understand the differences between modern and pre-modern tyranny one must turn to the political science of the classics. He believes that modern political science has its roots in Machiavelli and his *Prince*; whereas, pre-modern political science is anchored in Xenophon’s the *Education of Cyrus*, in which Xenophon attempts to rehabilitate Socrates from the charges that justified his execution, of sorts.

Briefly stated, pre-modern politics was based on beliefs about the how people **ought** to live. Although pre-moderns believed this ideal way of living was inherently worthy, they likewise believed that because of chance occurrences it could never be fully achieved. Modern politics differs in that it is based on the notion that all politics should be governed by how people **actually** live and that chance could and should be controlled.

Consequently, unlike pre-modern politics, modern politics is justified through at least three essential inventions. First, was the philosophy of history—historicism—where ideologies are constructed. Second, rational-empirical, “scientific” technologies for controlling chance behaviors in humans appeared. Third, is the refinement of institutional writing.

Before historicism, only great men were worthy of being remembered, of counting for something, of being committed to writing. Modern thought provided the epistemology to infuse institutions with the power inherent in writing. As Michel Foucault explains:

For a long time ordinary individuality—the everyday individuality of everyone—remained below the threshold of description. To be looked at, observed, described in detail, followed from day to day by an uninterrupted writing was a privilege. The chronicle of a man, the account of his life, his historiography, written as he lived out his life formed part of the rituals of his power. The disciplinary methods reversed this relation, lowered the threshold of describable individuality and made of this description a means of control and method of domination. It is no longer a monument for future memory, but a

document for possible use. . . . This turning of real lives into writing is no longer a procedure of heroization; it functions as a procedure of objectification and subjection.²³

The political ramification of the idea that people, *en mass*, could govern themselves instead of being governed by an absolute sovereign entity were immense and far-reaching. The aristocrats of Europe feared the tyranny of the majority, of all mediocrities. Instead of exercising brute power, the powerful would soon realized that people could be controlled through institutional practices if those practices could be made to appear natural, justified through scientific rationality, thus neutral. These institutional practices, when reduced to writing in the form of scientific enumeration and professional discourses, could be used to construct individuals in the images necessary to control them, to use them. By the later part of the twentieth century, both government and commercial/industrial elites openly referred to their employees as “human resources.”

Foucault describes the transition from a ritual, upward gaze domination to an observational, panoptic, downward, gaze domination thus,

The moment that saw the transition from historico-ritual mechanisms for the formation of individuality to the scientifico-disciplinary mechanisms, when the normal took over from the ancestral, and measurement from status, thus substituting for the individuality of the memorable man that of the calculable man, that moment when the sciences of man became possible is the moment when a new technology of power and a new political anatomy of the body were implemented.²⁴

Foucault explains how the power of modern thought operates through a set of “disciplinary technologies” that evolved from institutional practices, such as those found in prisons, the military, and schools. Foucault explains that

the success of disciplinary power derives no doubt from the use of simple instruments; hierarchical observation, normalizing judgments and their combination in a procedure that is specific to it, the examination. . . . the examination is at the centre of the procedures

that constitute the individual as effect and object of power, as effect and object of knowledge.²⁵

As public school educators today are acutely aware, the examination in the form of standardize achievement tests is the most obvious disciplinary technology operating under the guise of education.

Even before the ink fully dried on the Founding documents the technology of testing was being instituted into schooling practices in America. But it would not be in public education—still forming a generalizable structure—that testing would be used essentially to “scientifically” justify the separation of one student from another, it would be West Point. Here I rely heavily on the work of Keith Hoskin and Richard Macve. in their 1988 article, “The Genesis of Accountability: The West Point Connection.” They describe the influence that Sylvanus Thayer had on structuring education at West Point after he was appointed superintendent in 1817 (he served in this position until 1833). Thayer, having returned from Europe just prior to assuming his duties as superintendant of West Point, immediately instituted the system he borrowed from the French *École Polytechnique*. At the heart of the system was its numerical grading system. By 1819 Thayer was going far beyond what he borrowed from the *École Polytechnic* by including weekly grade reports.

The last half of the nineteenth century provided additional elements to justify and further the application of science to understanding humans, increasing the tyrannical power of modern thought. Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, published in 1859, contributed to the objectification of the human in several different ways. Although the word “evolution” did not appear in the book, the book nonetheless allowed for the invention of the notion that species evolved, not created as they presently appear. Their physical characteristics at any time, Darwin argued, were the best needed to survive the chance occurrences of changes in the environment of the material world in which they live. Some wanted to disprove Darwin. Significant among them was, for example, Louis Agassiz, a Swiss born, European educated paleontologist/naturalist who captivated many Americans by his “scientific” rhetoric.²⁶

But others, such as Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, saw the role that chance played in human affairs as an explanation and justification for social stratification. The historian Louis Menand explains Holmes's view of the individual relative to society as:

The assumption that people are justified in defending what they have become accustomed to is obviously an assumption heavily biased toward the status quo. . . . The key to Holmes's civil liberties opinions is the key to all his jurisprudence: it is that he thought only in terms of aggregate social forces; he had no concern for the individual. The spectacle of individuals falling victim to dominant political or economic tendencies, when those tendencies had been instantiated in duly enacted laws, gave him a kind of chilly satisfaction. It struck him as analogous to the death of soldiers in a battlefield victory, and justified on the same grounds—that for the group to move ahead, some people must inevitably fall by the wayside. “Every society rests on the death of men,” he liked to provide his friends by saying. He had, consequently, virtually no faith in the notion of individual human agency. On his view, successful people, like Morgan and Rockefeller, just had a better grasp of the social tendencies than unsuccessful people did. Everyone is simply riding the wave chance has put them on. Some people know how to surf; some people drown.²⁷

By the late 1930s it appeared that even trusted educators believed that social class was a natural phenomenon. For example, in the late 1930s, James B. Conant, then President of Harvard, would justify social stratification as natural from a misreading of a letter that Jefferson, later in life, sent to John Adams. Nicholas Lemann, in his acclaimed book, *The Big Test: The Secret History of the American Meritocracy*, describes how Conant justified his beliefs from Jefferson's letter. In the letter, Jefferson made the statement that “there is a natural aristocracy among men,” then, as a question, states that government is “the best which provides the most effectually for a pure selection of these natural *aristoi* into the offices of government,” then

claiming that his long ago failed attempt in Virginia to establish a system of universal public education, so that natural aristocrats could be sent to the University of Virginia where “Worth and genius would thus have been sought out from every condition of life, and compleatly (sic) prepared by education for defeating the competition of wealth and birth for public trust.” For Conant, testing would be the scientific technology for identifying natural aristocrats, and the SAT would be the test.²⁸

With the massive transference of principles and methods of natural science to the social sciences during the nineteenth century, scientific management was ready to be born, ready to be the general technology necessary to “manage” chance occurrences. Frederick Winslow Taylor, an engineer, is given credit for developing the principles of scientific management that would eventually be ubiquitous throughout the Western industrial world. Taylor would demonstrate many times that his system would significantly increase production, thus profits. Raymond Callahan brilliantly documented in his classic *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* that if not all of the principles of scientific management would be brought into the management of public schools, the essential notion of efficiency would.

It was at the annual meeting of school superintendents in 1913 that the discourse of scientific management was formally introduced into the general discourse of school management. At that meeting, there was a call for the use of “verifiable data” to education policies because educators were “no longer disputing whether education has a scientific basis; we are trying to find the basis.”²⁹ Callahan argues that such an emphasis on scientific management principles probably

strengthened the tendencies to use standardized tests, school surveys, and other procedures such as efficiency ratings, score cards for buildings, and elaborate systems of records and reports which gave at least the impression of providing a “factual” basis for education.³⁰

Although there has been warning and arguments against the tyranny of standardized tests, their use has gone unabated.³¹ At the beginning of the twenty-first century the notions of scientific management

have been more rigorously applied by school administrators now self ordained as leaders.

Scientific management and all of its variants—such as Managements by Objectives (MBO), Total Quality Management (TQM), and Outcomes-Based Education (OBE)—is part of the ideology of what Jean-François Lyotard calls “performativity”—the optimization of the relationship between inputs and outputs—and what Callahan meticulously detailed as *efficiency*. The discourse of *performativity* is a hegemonic expression of the high rationalism of modern thought which has effectively been used to first objectify, then measure, quantify, and categorize just about everything, including human social structures.³²

Foucault describes the end result of the pervasive use of scientific-technical knowledge to both shape and justify social structures through institutional practices as the *carceral* society, because modern institutions are “. . . linked to a whole series of ‘carceral’ mechanisms which seem distinct enough—since they are intended to alleviate pain, to cure, to comfort—but which tend, like the prison, to exercise power of normalization.”³³ More dramatically, Lyotard uses the term “Auschwitz” to signify just how impoverished recent Western history seems from the point of view of the “modern” project of the emancipation of humanity.³⁴

Conclusions

This Critical Enquiry began with the argument that the primary purpose of the American public education is to prepare children for citizenship in order that they might, through political acts, help fulfill the democratic ideals such as equity and access embedded in our Founding documents. But the enduring, persistent, and pernicious social stratification of the American society along the lines of gender, ethnicity, and economics, at least, is sufficient evidence that public education has not lived up to those beliefs.³⁵ Some high minded social activists might argue that our Founders believed that only white male elites, such as themselves, should be accorded those Rights enumerated in the Founding documents; thus, the notion that there is the Constitution provides justification that these values were intended for all is not supportable. This is a

specious argument at best. Put into a situation of being denied *access* or *equity*, for example, how many Americans today would agree that *access* and *equity*, or any Constitutional rights, are not fundamental human rights? Ought we to succumb to the current Hobbsian/Machiavellian political hegemony and write a new constitution to reflect the “realities” of socioeconomic divisions into SES classes that characterizes modern American life? Or ought we as educators, at least, to set about transforming public schooling into a liberating experience instead of the disciplinary institution it has become over at least the past 150 years? Would yet another reform movement governed by the discourse of modern thought save the schools? If the current reform movement is any indicator, the answer must be no. Characterized by the tiresome drone of the “adapt to our aspirations—or else” terror discourse of high-stakes testing presently emanating from federal and state level educrats and politicians, the current reform movement has left teachers, students, and building level administrators powerless and demoralized.³⁶ More law-like mandates to teachers and administrators are inherently repressive to some children, if not all.

Although we structure, order ourselves as a community according to law, and celebrate the fact that “we are a nation of laws not of men,” law can further exacerbate division and classification. As Roberto Calasso reminds us law does not in itself equal order; and order is not necessarily justice (*summum ius summa iniuria* — the more law the less justice). The true equation is *law* plus *sacrifice* equal *order*.³⁷ Order itself is hierarchal and justified on law alone. Nevertheless, some of our children must be sacrificed? Who among them will be chosen? Who will choose them? In current educational policies and practices the children to be sacrificed are on the lower side of the “normal” curve of distribution used to both explain and justify “standardized” tests. The power to interpret these tests, the power to choose, has been given by law to unelected educrats of all stripes to legally exercise state terror—in this capacity the educrats are indeed tyrants.

My greatest fear is that modern Americans have

“settled” for a class-based society, different only in how it has been constituted and maintained. The ideals we purport to cherish are just that, ideals—dragged out of our molding closet of Americanism on election days and after tragic, national events such as 9-11. One need not cite an extensive list of statistics that “factually” justify describing the American social order as highly stratified and generationally stable. To see the divisions first hand one must leave the smooth expressways that lead only to glittering shopping malls and the ever growing number of gated communities, distinguished for their oversized houses with three story atriums entrances and at least three oversized garages to accommodate their SUVs. One need only travel the back roads of the many rural Appalachias that dominate the American countryside, the barrios, and inner city neighborhoods to see the other America. Not unlike children everywhere, the children of the other America eagerly begin their schooling with the innocent optimism of childhood. Nevertheless, as

presently constituted, the public school is merely a carousel of endless hope dutifully adorned in patriotic bunting and sound of the daily mantra of the Pledge of Allegiance. While on this carousel of hope the “other” children are soon meticulously constructed to fit more perfectly into the hierarchical social strata into which they were born, they must get off at the very same SES gate from which they entered.

Perhaps I’ve been much too pessimistic about the future of the grand voyage that our Founders charted for us over 200 years ago. We might gain perspective even from our old enemies. James Murphy, an associate professor of government at Dartmouth College, noted in a recent *New York Times* commentary about schools and citizenship that when the late Chinese premier Zhou Enlai was asked for his assessment of the French Revolution, he was reported to have replied: “It’s a bit too soon to say, is it not?”³⁸ But enemies likewise can be wrong.

ENDNOTES

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22. Strauss, 22.
23. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, Alan Sheridan, tr ans. (New York; Vintage Books, 1979), 191-192.
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26. Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 97-148.
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